

## **ANIMATING GHOSTS: GUIDING CLAY ANIMATION PRODUCTION WITH A CHILD WITH AUTISM**

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The best ghost stories bear warnings that have a lingering spectral connection to an unresolved past that they are compelled to haunt. Those who are haunted but fail to heed these cautionary pronouncements are often doomed. Ghosts are at a junction between fright and resolve. Horror fans, cultural scholars, and literary theorists categorize these ghosts as “monsters” (beings to be feared) or part of “the other” (beings that are not of this world).

Let me get one thing clear: I do not align people with disabilities and developmental issues as monsters — but in many societies they are considered “the other.” In these settings, they are relegated to the margins and silenced. In effect, their presence becomes lingering and almost phantom-like.

This commentary hinges on the interaction between the author and an 11-year-old boy with autism — henceforth named Richard. The boy, who has a penchant for ghost stories, has been enrolled in the weekly Saturday animation workshops conducted by Animation Studies professors at the Texas Tech University’s Burkhart Center for Autism Education and Research. The initial approach was for children like Richard to be able to express themselves using simple stop-motion animation exercises. In this approach, I utilized Visual Methodology in plumbing through Richard’s work and thoughts. I triangulated that with his mother’s reactions and also weaved through the conversations I had with those who worked with children in the autism spectrum via the arts. Let me preface that this commentary is a self-reflexive approach to Art-based educational research which according to Barone and Eisner is an “enhancement of perspectives.”

Animation is not the usual art form that is taught to children with autism. I am from the Philippines, where children in the spectrum were given lessons and workshops on painting, theater performance, singing, dance, and culinary arts. A practitioner was curious on how animation can be vital in the therapy for children with autism. Animation is labor-intensive, the process is quite mechanical as it is technical and demands resolute and focus. However, animation can be a great avenue for creativity and art production, which involves tactility and helps develop a keen sense of movement and transition. Perhaps, animation can be revelatory in terms of the child’s pursuits, dreams, fascinations. In the process of animating, visual elicitation can commence. In Jon Prosser (2012)’s “Toward a More Seeing Research,” he writes: “Visual elicitation involves using photographs, drawings, or diagrams in a research interview to stimulate a response and remain the most popular and common method in participatory visual research.”

In our workshops, participation is geared towards a parameter of instructions in which the child has to render. The weekly workshop has a series of exercises in different manners of stop-motion animation. I am tasked to facilitate and guide Richard in his development with animation. It gave me a chance not just to see what he is capable of but what his interests are. Furthermore, Prosser writes that “Participants feel less pressured when discussing sensitive topics through intermediary artifacts. Because they do not speak directly about a topic on which they feel vulnerable but work through a material go-between.” On the first day I was assigned to Richard, the first minutes were awkward because his eyes seemed to glaze with impatience and boredom at the activity. I wrote in field notes: “I was a teaching assistant today for animation class for kids with autism. I was deathly afraid because I have no training and education to work with children in the autism spectrum. I was assigned to work with 11-year old Richard and the start was a bit rocky...then as we progressed with his stop-motion work, he was talking about horror movies and THEN spawn comics. Richard has a weird taste for the grotesque which is my realm. after which we were talking about many things ranging from dumbo octopus to demonology. His mother was there and she was smiling at how Richard was gabbing, laughing, and drawing at the same time. His mom told me later, ‘I am so glad

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you got paired up with him.”

In J. Gary Knowles and Andra L. Cole(2008)'s *The Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, they write “that it is the process, particularly the embodied experience, of creating identity that is crucial to participants’ capacity to provide a more realistic response than that attained by word-only interviews. This is particularly crucial for students like Richard in which they can channel through their animation works what they want to say. Cole and Knowles add that “people with autistic spectrum disorders, and many others with intellectual disabilities who are habitually and systematically excluded from research data because of the underlying assumption that they are insufficiently articulate to contribute through interviews or simple surveys. End ”

What Richard articulated was his fascination for gore and ghost stories. Initially, I was cautious about discussing, blood, gore, mayhem with a child. A very dark spin. I was told that some kids with autism may have some quirky and/or dark imagination. Well, it is a learning experience to be confronted with this point of view.

However, this is how we connected. Dealing with children with autism requires thorough engagement. I sought help with Ms. Ann Lumba, an art educator who is taking a masters degree in special education based in the Philippines. What she offered was a bit of reinforcing that it is perfectly fine for me to discuss such things with Richard (and his mother agrees with this) because these are of his interests. Ms. Lumba added, “Most of them in the spectrum are visual learners. Animation is a perfect approach in lessons for them.” Indeed, when I discussed ghost stories and horror films, Richard seemed to be more attuned to the workshop. Ms. Lumba explained, “quote You earned his trust. Of course you have to show interest in why he sees exploding bodies as subjects. From thereon, you will see which direction he will take as far as themes/subjects are concerned. Pick on his interests and match it through your teaching style. It’s all play-it-by-ear. End quote”

Since Richard and I both like monsters and horror films, I would tell him that every horror film lies a lesson, warning, or a cautionary pronouncement. At one point in our workshop, Richard’s mom set me aside and told me that Richard has been reading more and every time he would read a horror story he would discuss with his mom what the lesson or warning could be.

This is how I cater to Richard with Ms. Lumba’s suggestion. She told me, “My approach in teaching those with autism is always individualized. One should take note of the behavior of the child and earn the child’s trust.” Ms. Lumba reiterated how this is crucial for the development of the child in the spectrum for not only will the child engage, that child will be productive. Ms. Lumba emphasized, “You have to be clear with the requirement of the module or the steps in animation. Don’t force him though. Be ready with reinforcements for compliance and good behavior. Candies and toys may not be the ideal choice. So, you can use free screen time, praise, hug, play time, or any activity they like like art.” My reinforcement with Richard is to have conversations about filmmaking and monster lore.

I invoke the monster imagery here in my commentary not just to demonstrate Richard’s fascination for them; but also to connect this workshop with children with autism to a societal construction of the monster, which is the embodiment of the other. I speak, again, from the point of view of somebody who is from the Philippines and whose culture and people are not that well informed regarding this disability. Ms. Lumba and I share our drive to be of service to children of the spectrum and to their parents, but the real monster is how society depicts them as “less” or as “burdens.”

In Literary Theory and Cultural Studies, the figure of the monster is that which enacts the society’s borders of what is decent and acceptable. In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2012)’s *Seven Theses of Monster Culture*, he writes, “The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them.” This animation workshop with Richard has demonstrated to me how to provide space for mobility via creativity and art production. Working with Richard helped me situate two things (1) how to engage animation as crucial and effective a method in dealing with developmental issues that cater to focus, productivity and what is important for me, creativity; and (2) how institutional support is equally as crucial in this endeavor. When I mentioned to Ms. Lumba of this workshop, she was excited as well as saddened that the Philippines does not have this sort of endeavor. She was urging me to keep on fostering creativity and interest in Richard’s work because that is the way to see the changes that we seek. She said, “These people are like us. They can sense authenticity and will react to teachers who aren’t. Also, there will be a time when you realize as a teacher that you alone will not be enough. This is a constant team effort if you are handling people with disabilities. In the US, they have an IEP (Individualized education program) which is fabulous. We Filipinos are envious of the amount of support the government and society show when it comes to people with disabilities.” To add to that, the real monster is how individuals like Richard are misunderstood by a society where many people dismiss them as having “nothing to

offer” or “unable to connect” to the mainstream world. In our weekly animation workshop, Richard already believes this with his sharp sense of aesthetics, understanding what makes a good movie great, and what makes a ghost story enticing as it is effective.

I wanted to learn how to do this for me to bring this back to the Philippines where there is a growing number of reported cases of developmental disorders among young Filipinos and maybe cite how animation (the production of it) can enable children within the autism spectrum to articulate their experience and expression.

Richard’s mother agrees with this assessment. She said, “Because of the communication deficits many children with autism have, I feel stop-motion animation slows down that process of communication and allows students to express ideas and feelings they may not be able to otherwise express verbally.”

Richard’s mother mentioned that the workshop made him go through what she says were difficult for him; such as teamwork, adaptability, thinking on your toes, making creative choices and listening to other people’s suggestions. In the course of the workshop, Richard’s mother and I would have a string of conversations. I asked her what made her sign up for this workshop. She said, “Some of my child’s favorite movies are stop-motion animated movies. He has a great love of movies and speaks of becoming a stop-motion animator someday. It is a medium he admires because of the ability to use clay. From a very young age, he has been obsessed with clay. When he was very young, about 3 years old, he was very hyperactive and engaged in self-stimulatory behavior constantly. I noticed early on that when he had clay in his hands, he was able to sit and sustain attention for longer periods of time than he normally could without it. He has never had an interest in toys like most children do. Clay is the only item of interest to him. I find that clay and stop-motion animation are a perfect pairing of his two loves. We had attempted stop-motion animation before at home but with limited resources and guidance, as I am not very tech-savvy. When I saw the advertisement in tech announce, I thought I was dreaming! I was so happy and grateful to allow him to meet and learn with real animators!”

Richard’s mom went on to assert, “He was really happy that he was able to express his ideas and for them to be celebrated by the team. Often, he is told his ideas are ‘too dark’ or ‘strange.’ He loved being able to express his ideas creatively without judgment. He was also happy to have complete control over all aspects of production including the sound effects and music and to be supported by trained animators.”

As part of my assessment of my involvement and of the animation workshop, I asked Richard’s mom to share her thoughts regarding what did Richard like best, were there changes that she saw? Her response is this: “His confidence grew so much. He came out of the workshop feeling like a real animator and with big ideas for future projects. I think he also improved tremendously in his ability to collaborate with others. Clay has always been a personal experience for him, something he worked with privately or when he needed to calm after an overwhelming day. This was the first time for him to share his creations with others and he was excited to do so with such a receptive audience. At the beginning of the project, I wasn’t sure how he would handle constructive criticism from others, since he usually works independently. I was worried he would react negatively and not want to participate but he showed great respect towards everyone’s ideas and constructive feedback. I was incredibly surprised and proud to see him respond so maturely! He was so proud of the professional quality of his final project and confidently shared it with family and friends.”

Richard’s fascination for monsters brought me back to the heart of the matter: to deal with society’s monstrous deflection of people that are not socionormative. Literally in Richard’s hands, he shaped his stories and characters. At one point nearing the end of editing, Richard decided to change the ending. The original ending was his character to run away into the night, but he decided to add something, which is the confrontation of the monster itself. I’d like to think that this animation workshop is a metaphor for that confrontation on the monster that is the act of society to relegate to silence or to the margins those who are different; through this workshop and their creativity, their stories are animated and flourish.

## References

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